

Minneapolis - St. Paul Star Tribune

September 20, 2004

Court Offered a Second Chance, and Three Now are Dead

By Marna Anderson

<http://www.startribune.com/stories/562/4987220.html>

Ten days ago, as Americans prepared to mark the terror and horror of 9/11, Casandra Current fell victim to the present-day terror and horror of domestic violence. The evening of Sept. 10, Current, her mother, and her stepgrandfather were murdered in their north Minneapolis home, allegedly by Current's ex-boyfriend, Bryant Jones.

Early this month, Current had reported to police that Jones had abused and raped her. She told them that she feared he would kill her. Yet for more than a week, Jones "eluded" the Fridley Police Department, the Minneapolis Police Department, the Plymouth Police Department and federal law enforcement.

Minneapolis Chief of Police William McManus says that his department will work more closely with domestic abuse agencies and others to help victims avoid escalating violence.

WATCH, an organization that monitors the courts on cases of domestic violence, sex assault and child abuse, agrees that a stronger collaboration between domestic abuse programs and law enforcement is critical. Equally important, however, is the need to hold offenders accountable for first-time offenses and for all members of society to recognize domestic violence when we see it.

Jones' first offense in Hennepin County was for burglarizing his ex-girlfriend's home and violating the order for protection she had against him. At the 2003 sentencing, the victim stated that Jones had "choked her and beat her" and that it would be in his "best interest to serve the time in prison."

But he didn't. Instead, the judge (reluctantly) stayed the 38-month sentence because Jones was "amenable to treatment." He was ordered to chemical dependency treatment and placed on five years' probation.

In the court transcript of the sentencing, the judge asks a rhetorical question: "I'm thinking, what is the harm of believing that Mr. Jones is amenable to treatment?"

Well, we now know the harm. And it is too late. It is too late to treat Jones' burglary charge for what it was: a crime of domestic violence. The burglary was part of an ongoing history of abuse

and it should have been treated as such. But the justice system chose to consider Jones an addict instead of a batterer. Court documents do not reveal any attempt to address his violent behavior.

At this same sentencing, the defense attorney said, “I don’t think the court has anything to lose by giving him a chance and giving him the opportunity to succeed. And if he doesn’t succeed, it’s on his shoulders. He’s going to be sent to prison for 38 months.”

Yet Jones’ history of domestic violence in Cook County, Illinois, and in Hennepin County indicated no reason to give him another chance. Between the date he pled guilty to the burglary charge and the date of the sentencing, he had tested positively for drugs, and he had violated the terms of his probation while in Illinois.

The defense attorney was wrong in the bail hearing when he asserted that the burglary was “not an act of violence.”

Although Jones burglarized his ex-girlfriend’s home when she was not there, the burglary was committed in the context of domestic violence.

The defense attorney was also wrong when he said the court didn’t have anything to lose in giving Jones a second chance.

When a woman, her mother, and her stepgrandfather are dead, allegedly at the hands of this man with a known criminal record, the courts risk losing the public’s trust in the criminal justice system. And that is a big loss.

We all lose when domestic violence is ignored or minimized. As a community, we have to look our mistakes in the face and work together to figure out how to protect women and bring an end to the terrorism of domestic violence.

Marna Anderson is executive director of WATCH.

Copyright © 2004 *Star Tribune*.